The Lies America Tells Itself About the Middle East

As Its Influence Faded, Washington Dissembled and Denied Reality

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On any given day during the long war in Gaza, a Biden administration official could be expected to assert any of the following: a cease-fire was around the corner, the United States was working tirelessly to achieve one, it cared equally about the Israelis and the Palestinians, a historic Saudi-Israeli normalization deal was at hand, and all this was bound up with an irreversible path to Palestinian statehood.

Not one of those pronouncements bore even a loose resemblance to the truth. Talks about a cease-fire dragged on, and when they fitfully bore fruit, the resulting understandings quickly fell apart. The United States refrained from doing the one thing—conditioning or halting the military aid to Israel that kept the fire from ceasing—that might have made it happen. Taking that step was also the one thing that might have demonstrated, beyond platitudes, a U.S. commitment to protecting both Israeli and Palestinian lives. Saudi Arabia kept repeating that normalization with Israel depended on progress toward a Palestinian state, and the Israeli government consistently ruled such progress out. The more time went on, the more U.S. statements were exposed as empty words, met with disbelief or indifference. That did not stop them from being made. Did U.S. policymakers believe what they said? If not, why did they keep saying it? And if they did, how could they ignore so much contrary evidence staring them in the face?

The falsehoods served as cover for a policy that enabled Israel's ferocious attacks on Gaza and hailed the most modest, fleeting improvement in the situation in the Palestinian enclave as the product of American humanitarianism and resolve. Israel's brutality worsened under the Trump administration, but those earlier falsehoods had paved the way. They helped normalize Israel's indiscriminate killings; its targeting of hospitals, schools, and mosques; its use of access to food as a weapon of war; and its continued reliance on American weapons. They laid the ground and there was no turning back.

The deceit was not new. Its roots stretch back well before the war in Gaza and extend well beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It became a habit. For decades, the United States dissembled about its stance toward the conflict, posing as a mediator when it was an outright partisan. It dissembled when it helped put together a "peace process" that did far more to perpetuate and solidify the status quo than to upend it. It dissembled when it portrayed its broader Middle East policy as promoting democracy and human rights. It dissembled when it claimed success even as its efforts yielded serial disaster.

As the falsehoods have become more apparent and harder to ignore, U.S. influence has dwindled. Israelis, Palestinians, and other local actors ignore the charade—leaving behind the bromides about the two-state solution, peace, democracy, and American mediation—and revert to more visceral, unembellished attitudes that sprout from their pasts. As in earlier decades, Palestinians—adrift, leaderless, brimming with anger and thirst for revenge—resort to isolated acts of violence against Israelis, awaiting the day they cohere into more organized form. As before, Israel, unrestrained and unbridled, extends its arm wherever and whenever it sees a Palestinian ripe for killing: in the 1970s in Amman, Beirut, Tunis, Paris, or Rome; nowadays in Doha and Tehran. On both sides, worse is to come. The United States will do little but contemplate the debris.

THE ANATOMY OF FAILURE

The life of a failed U.S. policy in the Middle East proceeds in stages. First comes the wrong-headed approach, misreading of a situation, deliberate or inadvertent mistake, as when U.S. officials assert that the best way to influence Israel is not through pressure but with a warm embrace. When they clumsily meddle in Palestinian politics, seeking to anoint a preferred set of "moderate" leaders, an endorsement that, in the eyes of those leaders' constituents, has little to distinguish itself from an indictment. When they exclude from peacemaking the forces most able to derail it, those on both sides who, for reasons religious or ideological, share a deep, immutable attachment to all the land between the river and the sea, and who would experience giving up an inch of it as a wrenching ripping apart—Israeli settlers and religious nationalists, Palestinian refugees and Islamists.

The riddle of American policy is that its masters know so much and comprehend so little. Information is not understanding; it can be the opposite. In 2000, senior U.S. intelligence officials, based on what they had seen, heard, and thought they had learned, assured President Bill Clinton that the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat would have no choice but to accept Clinton's proposals during the summit at Camp David, that he would be crazy not to. Arafat turned them down, celebrated as a hero by his people for doing so. In 2006, the Bush administration missed clear signs that pointed to a Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections for which Washington had clamored and about which Palestinian officials had fretted.

Years later, after the 2011 uprising in Syria broke out, raw intelligence erroneously depicted a battlefield that gave President Bashar al-Assad scant chance of short-term survival, the rebels who sought to oust him a relatively swift path to success. During the Biden administration, U.S. officials relied on intelligence reports to evaluate the thinking of Iranian leaders and their stance on a proposed nuclear deal. Their assessments, as often as not, turned out to be wrong. They were surprised by the Taliban's lightning victory after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, by Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, by the collapse of Assad's regime the following year, surprised that they had been surprised.

These shocks were not the result of deliberate distortions in which intelligence is molded to suit official whims—such as when the Central Intelligence Agency in 2003 told President George W. Bush what he wanted to hear: that the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, that the case against him was a "slam dunk." They were the result of a dynamic that is less deceptive, less purposeful. It is no less treacherous.

Intelligence data often comes with appropriate warnings. Officials may be reminded that the information they have received was gleaned from a single conversation in one place, at one time, without the benefit of wider analysis, broader context, and knowledge of unspoken assumptions. They can be told that whatever is extracted is not the whole puzzle and that to possess pieces of the puzzle can be more misleading than to have none. Yet the cautions matter little. To those who have never crossed paths with raw intelligence—the intercept of a conversation, the contents of a secret memorandum—the thrill can be hard to describe. You feel as if you were in the protagonists' room and in their minds, you have an advantage they cannot possess, can only dream of. You know. But you do not. American policymakers read and barely understood, read some more and understood even less.

The enigma in these and other instances is not chiefly that the United States misjudged. To get things wrong, misread foreign dynamics, or misapprehend local actors is not unusual. For most policymakers, it is part of the job. What is uncommon, and harder to explain, is how often these failures have been allowed to happen and recur; how even their proliferation has led to neither personal nor institutional accountability, seldom to a mild reprimand, let alone a genuine rethink; how little the United States appears capable of learning from mistakes. The issue is why the country has proved so resistant to changing its ways. Next in the life of an American failure is its replication.

Even more confounding than the mistakes or their stubborn repetition is U.S. officials' habit of voicing a falsehood even after they know it to be untrue, even after they know that others know it to be untrue. The final stage of failure is the lie. The lie is born of the failure, and it blooms as the failure recurs. American policymakers do something they think will work, do it again even though it did not work, say it works when everyone knows it does not, promise it will when all have lost patience and faith. Unmoored from reality, the pronouncements veer into happy talk. It is more than mere spin. It suggests a deliberate, almost strategic attitude of boundless cheer contrary to common sense and everyday experience. It is this, the casual way in which the United States regularly proffers optimistic statements that fly in the face of all evidence and stand in sharp contrast to a sorry record, that is most striking and perplexing.

HOW AN ILLUSION BECOMES A LIE

Lies rest at the heart of politics and diplomacy, but there are lies, and there are lies. There is the lie that purports to serve the common good, as when U.S. President John F. Kennedy misled the public about the secret U.S.-Soviet understanding regarding the United States' removal of missiles from Turkey to end the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. There is the big lie, blatant and oft-

repeated, that aims to convert its audience to zombie-like belief. The shrewd lie or lie of the cynic, the sort at which Henry Kissinger excelled and in which the George W. Bush administration indulged ahead of the Iraq invasion. It can justify war or prevent it. It can break a logjam. It can kill. The lie of the hopeless striving to rally hope, of Saddam's spokesperson during the 2003 Iraq war, extolling triumph amid annihilation. The lie of the underdog, to which Arafat clung like one clings to a buoy for survival. He would tell Egypt that Syria was his foe, tell Syria that it was Egypt, tell Saudi Arabia that it was both. He would forswear knowledge of a fighter he had just ordered into action and claim familiarity with one on whom he had never once set eyes. All would learn to distrust him—the learning came fast. But lies saved him and put his cause on the map.

There are lies that get things done, even if what gets done can be ugly, foul, violent, or worse. They have a purpose, not always or necessarily a higher one. A purpose all the same. But the fabrications that came to pervade and corrode the United States' Middle East diplomacy are not of this kind. They stand apart because they fool nobody and those who utter them must know that nobody is fooled. They happen when one U.S. administration after another has proclaimed its determination to achieve a two-state solution well after the time such an outcome had become impossible; when the Biden administration asserted it cared equally about Israeli and Palestinian lives; when it proclaimed it was tireless in its pursuit of a cease-fire or that Saudi-Israeli normalization was there for the taking, just within reach.

Are all these lies? The word may seem too strong. Many of the assertions do not start that way. They originate as misapprehension or self-delusion. On the eve of a 2000 summit between Clinton and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Geneva, every member of the U.S. team believed that the Syrian leader would reject the Israeli peace proposal they had been asked to convey. Indeed, they had told the Israeli prime minister as much. Still, they must have convinced themselves there was a chance; why else would they have gone? At Camp David in 2000, U.S. participants likewise persuaded themselves that a deal between Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was at hand when nothing—neither territorial division nor the status of Jerusalem nor the fate of Palestinian refugees—had been agreed. When, during President Barack Obama's second term, Secretary of State John Kerry, fresh into his Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic foray, said that the parties were closer to a deal than ever before, it is doubtful that he was pretending. Like others before him, he was confident that reaching an agreement was a matter of will and perseverance, both of which he possessed in abundance. When Biden administration officials claimed that Saudi Arabia would be ready for normalization with Israel, they probably meant it; after all, that is what Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had privately conveyed.

Over time, it becomes difficult to tell where self-delusion ends and dissembling begins. Eventually, after the words are repeated often enough, the distinction blurs and matters less, if at all. The two merge. An illusion endlessly repeated despite its demonstrable untruth ceases to be an illusion and becomes a lie; a lie endlessly retold can become second nature, so ingrained

and instinctive as to detach from its origins and morph into self-delusion. American officials' recurrent claims, over many decades, that they are committed to a two-state solution and that another round of U.S.-mediated talks could bring it about were no doubt born of genuine conviction. When, failure after failure, they continue to echo the mantra, it is no longer an illusion and turns into deceit. It is another of those phenomena one needs to experience to appreciate. American officials had faith when they went to Geneva and Camp David and also knew both would be a bust; believed in Kerry's initiative and knew it was quixotic; trusted that Saudi-Israeli normalization was achievable and were resigned to the fact that, for the time being, it was a pipe dream. They both knew and did not know and were not sure which was which. "The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth," George Orwell wrote in his dystopian novel, *1984.* Proof disproves belief, and still the faith endures.

THE LIMITS OF POWER

There came a time when, in its dealings with the Middle East, the United States began to make a religion out of optimism, embrace an ideology of wishful thinking, routinely speak empty words, and issue claims readily disproved by events. It is hard to identify a precise date, easier to identify a probable cause: the acquired habit cannot be separated from the erosion of U.S. power and influence.

No party can match American military or economic dominance, but an increasing number of partners and enemies in the Middle East learned to disregard it. The United States, with all its might, was regularly rebuffed by Israel, often even by the Palestinians, and did little more than witness its own embarrassment. If power is the ability to stretch one's capacity beyond its objective measure and direct the behavior of others, this was the reverse. The tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is not Washington's fault alone. But it is difficult to imagine a greater chasm between capability and accomplishment. The bully was bullied and did nothing about it.

Elsewhere, in Afghanistan as in Iraq, the United States showed it did not know how to wage a war, much less win one. Thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Iraqis lost their lives. The Iraq war ended with an Iranian-backed government and militias in charge, the Afghanistan war with the Taliban back in power in the wake of an ignominious U.S. retreat.

The United States showed it could not manage peace, either. Across the region, it embraced autocrats, rebuked them, embraced them once more. It sought to promote a democratic transition in Egypt in 2011, a chapter that closed with the consolidation of a government more repressive than the one its leaders helped overthrow. In Libya in 2011, Obama ordered strikes that helped topple the country's leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi. The result was civil war, instability, the proliferation of armed militias, as well as the flow of weapons across Africa and of refugees into Europe. The U.S. president hoped the operation would succeed, later described it as a "shit show." He was right on one of those counts. The Obama administration's subsequent

efforts to oust the Syrian regime through heavy investment in the armed opposition followed a similar pattern: U.S. involvement helped prolong a civil war, further encouraged Iranian and Russian interventions, and failed to bring the rebels to power. Many of the weapons the United States helped ship to Syria landed in the hands of jihadist groups that the United States then scrambled to subdue.

In these and other instances, the Arab uprisings took a dark and ugly path. When they began, Obama famously spoke of the United States backing the winds of change, being on the "right side of history." History paid no heed. In each case, wishful thinking stumbled on hard facts, and the United States appeared curiously oblivious to the lessons of its own Middle East history —lessons about its overconfidence; the limits of its power; the resilience of established governments; the unreliability of local partners keen for American succor, indifferent to American advice; the blowback that follows propping up armed groups about which Washington knows little and over which it has even less control; its repeated attraction, like moth to flame, to a region it has repeatedly vowed to escape. Lessons, in short, about the marriage of the United States' irresistible urge to meddle in a region and its unfamiliarity with that region's ways.

Even when the outcomes for which it had labored came to pass, they did not come at Washington's behest. Years of U.S. efforts to weaken regional militant movements—Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, Palestinian armed groups, the Houthis—did little to erode their influence. The United States had sought to cripple them in different ways, and they suffered from the blows, but they bounced back, thriving on the adversity. The significant strike, the serious one, came at Israel's hands, when it decapitated Hezbollah and devastated its ranks in September 2024. Shortly before Assad fled Damascus that December and his regime disintegrated, the United States had concluded that both were there to stay and pondered a deal to improve bilateral relations. Stunned, American officials could do little more than watch as a group designated as a terrorist organization by the United States swiftly chased Assad out, completing the task Washington had tried so hard and so unsuccessfully to accomplish, and sit down with someone who, in the quick transition from opposition to power, had transformed in their eyes from jihadist to statesman.

With each failure came the falsehood that became the marrow of U.S. Middle East diplomacy. In Afghanistan, the United States repeated that success was around the corner and chased its tail until it caught up with defeat. While claiming to be engaged in a fight for democracy and human rights, Washington was flanked by partners—Egypt, Gulf Arab monarchies and sheikhdoms, Israel—that ignored the former and flouted the latter. The United States insisted its pressure could constrain Iran's nuclear program. When the pressure did not work, more was supposed to do the trick. Yet each new U.S. sanction slapped on in response to every new Iranian act of defiance was proof of its own futility. One cannot seriously argue that pressure will curb Iran's behavior if more pressure continually yields worse behavior.

At times, strangest of all, there is both pretense and confession of the pretense. When Obama armed Syrian rebels, he publicly asserted, "This dictator will fall." Later, he acknowledged that the idea of such an opposition succeeding—a ragtag group of "former doctors, farmers, pharmacists" vanquishing an army—was a fantasy. The Biden administration decried President Donald Trump's 2018 decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal that Obama had negotiated and to reimpose sanctions. In the same breath, it boasted that it had not lifted a single sanction, had added many more, and vowed to increase the pressure it acknowledged had not worked. President Joe Biden, also, when U.S. forces began to go after the Houthis in Yemen in response to their attacks on commercial ships, and U.S. military spokespeople repeatedly claimed success, gave this curious statement about the strikes he had ordered to a reporter: "When you say are they working, are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes." U.S. presidents were as good as their words, and their words as clear as mush.

The less the United States governs the course of events, the more its officials feel the need to talk about them, which is one way to project a sense of control. What Washington loses in influence, it makes up in noise. It masks impotence with loquaciousness, futility with eloquence. True power is quiet. The disconnect between words and reality is near impossible to comprehend, save perhaps as a hint of the end of an era. It suggests the wistfulness of a once almighty superpower that longs for the days when it could get its way, the weight of an incentive structure that penalizes pessimism for the judgment it passes on American purpose and rewards optimism for the verdict it casts on American prowess, or the hope that compulsive, cheerful repetition will make the deceptions real.

BACK TO REALITY

How the Arab world initially reacted to Trump's reelection in 2024 spoke volumes. By almost any standard, Trump should have had everything going against him in this regard. In his first term, he had decisively tilted the field in Israel's favor, eager to break with convention and jettison peace process truisms he dismissed as fairy tales. During his campaign, he had called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "finish the job" in Gaza; whatever moral indignation Biden officials dared voice at Israel's conduct of its war there would find no echo among their successors. Yet in the early days, in many corners of the Middle East, relief came more readily than despair at the thought of bidding farewell to Biden's approach—and, as they saw it, Obama's, as well.

The familiar explanation that it takes an autocrat to enjoy an autocrat, that in Trump, Arab dictators recognized one of their ilk, goes only so far. Biden, after all, had hardly proved a true crusader on behalf of democracy and human rights. What Arab leaders and a not insignificant portion of their publics resented was Washington's moral vanity, feckless expressions of empathy, and convictions devoid of courage. What they found hard to stomach were the lies. If you are not going to lift a finger for the Palestinians, have the decency not to pretend to care. At least with Trump, they thought, they knew what they were getting, even if his actions could be unpredictable and mostly not to their liking. They saw in him a leader without moral compass,

at ease with the unashamed exercise of power. Unlike his predecessors, Trump did not drone on about an imaginary two-state solution; meant it when he said all options were on the table regarding Iran; and, when he authorized talks with Hamas, dropped the pantomime of refusing to engage with the only Palestinian entity that could decide on matters of war and peace. How much this represents a break with the past remains to be seen. Still, after years of faux outrage and bogus preaching, genuine cynicism was to many a welcome breath of fresh air.

Over decades, the United States had gradually built an alternate universe. A universe in which happy talk comes true and actions produce promised consequences. In which Washington's mission in Afghanistan gives rise to a modern democracy and U.S.-backed government forces can stand up to the Taliban. In which economic sanctions yield desired political change, domesticate the Houthis, reverse Iran's nuclear advances. In which the United States is engaged in a decisive struggle of democratic forces against autocratic regimes. A universe in which moderate Palestinians represent their people, will reform the Palestinian Authority and curb its political demands; a reasonable Israeli center will take charge thanks to gentle American prodding, will agree to meaningful territorial withdrawals and to a Palestinian state worthy of the name. A universe in which a cease-fire in Gaza is imminent, international justice is blind, and Washington's crude double standards do not incessantly defile the international order it purports to defend.

Then there is the actual universe, all flesh and bones and lies.